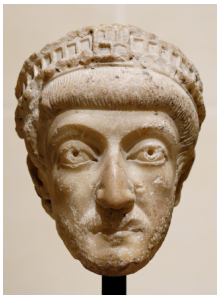
Theodosius II

(10 January 402 – 28 July 450)



BRIEFING

Theodosius II (Ancient Greek: Θεοδόσιος *Theodosios*; 10 April 401 – 28 July 450), called "the Calligrapher", was Roman emperor from 402 to 450. He was proclaimed *Augustus* as an infant and ruled as the Eastern Empire's sole emperor after the death of his father Arcadius in 408. His reign was marked by the promulgation of the Theodosian law code and the construction of the Theodosian walls of Constantinople. He also presided over the outbreak of two great Christological controversies, Nestorianism and Eutychianism.

EARLY LIFE AND REIGN

Theodosius II was born to the eastern emperor **Arcadius** and the empress **Aelia Eudoxia** in April of 401. As **Eudoxia** had produced three girls prior to this time, Theodosius' birth was received with considerable excitement, both by his family and by the broader population of Constantinople. He was baptized and crowned Augustus in January of the following year to enthusiastic crowds.Unlike his father, about whose early life we know practically nothing, Theodosius' youth is well-attested and it was spent preparing him for his future imperial duties. From what we can tell of his education, the young emperor was not trained to be the passive figurehead his father largely was.

He began, as did most upper class youths, in the cursus of classical education, with grammarians and later rhetoricians. He was apparently bilingual and showed a thirst for learning. The young emperor particularly enjoyed editing and correcting manuscripts. As he grew older and succeeded his father as sole ruler of the east in 408, Theodosius was instructed in the more martial skills of horsemanship, swordplay and perhaps other military arts as well. His eldest sister, Pulcheria, who would gain great importance after the end of Anthemius' career, oversaw his moral education: orthodoxy, philanthropy and asceticism were all part of the curriculum. Pulcheria also taught Theodosius the subtleties of being emperor: how to physically comport oneself, how to control emotion, and how to deal with ministers and aides. Given his sister's piety, it is probable that the young man was also kept isolated from women. Theodosius' education, in sum, was training for an active, involved Christian emperor.

But like his father before him and his uncle **Honorius** in the west, Theodosius' youth at accession meant that he would be unable to ever effectively assert himself later in his reign. The Persian King, Isdigerdes, had briefly inserted himself into Roman affairs by threatening war if any but Theodosius succeeded his father, a plan apparently devised by **Arcadius**. The young Augustus was quickly accepted, but the Praetorian Prefect, Anthemius, continued to dominate political affairs as he had in the last years of **Arcadius'** reign. In part due to the acceptance of Isdigerdes' role as guardian, Rome and Persia remained at peace until the Great King's death in 421.

Anthemius meanwhile continued his work at mending fences with the west. When the western generalissimo, Stilicho, was assassinated, relations between the two halves of the empire improved considerably. **Honorius** and Theodosius shared the consulship in 409 and Constantinople even sent 4,000 troops to help guard Ravenna and **Honorius** against the Visigoths. While this gesture proved fruitless, the east and west now worked more closely than they had since the death of **Theodosius I**.

Anthemius also set about making Constantinople more defensible. In 413, he completed a circuit wall that enclosed most of the city and established a crucial water supply. Events since the 370s had proved the hinterlands unsafe: Illyricum, Thrace and other Balkan provinces had been repeatedly overrun by Germanic and Hunnic peoples. Indeed, as recently as 408, the city had been threatened by a group of Huns under the leadership of Uldin. He had been defeated, but the memory of that and other raids spurred Anthemius' building projects.

After 414, however, Anthemius fell off the political map and we can assume that he died. It is possible, however, that Theodosius dismissed the Prefect. If that is the case, it perhaps indicates the degree to which new powers at court now gained influence over the emperor. The young man increasingly came under the control of Pulcheria, who began to insert herself into public life. Whatever the reason, by mid-414, the young woman had risen to dominate the still underaged emperor.

THE REGENCY OF PULCHERIA

Edward Gibbon once wrote of Pulcheria: "she alone, among all the descendants of the great Theodosius (I), appears to have inherited any share of his manly spirit and abilities." Even before she took full control of her younger brother, she had shown herself a powerful force: in 412, at the age of 15, she had convinced Theodosius to dismiss the chamberlain (praepositus), Antiochus, who had been overseeing the imperial household since the days of **Arcadius**. In the following year, Pulcheria had consecrated herself to perpetual virginity and likewise exhorted her two sisters to do the same. It was a vow she would not break, even when she married the emperor, **Marcian**, thirty-seven years later. More immediately, however, it gave her enormous moral authority to oversee the upbringing and education of the young emperor.

No sooner had Anthemius disappeared than Pulcheria completed her ascendancy by having herself made Augusta in July of 414. She may have gotten help from Aurelian, who was named Praetorian Prefect of the east shortly thereafter. With or without his help, the young woman's bid was successful. So that there be no question of her authority, an official portrait in Constantinople was dedicated in the following year, depicting **Honorius**, Theodosius II and Pulcheria. And by denying her capacity for childbirth, she offered a new conception of female power in the public sphere, based on sanctity and the cult of the imperial mystique.

Her authority manifested itself in a strongly pro-orthodox administration. Pulcheria, in her adolescent brother's name, passed laws against Jews, pagans and heretics. For the first time, pagans were officially banned from holding public office and serving in the military. This would set an important precedent in the following century for ostracizing other undesirables. Her movements against Jews and their religion were particularly onerous: one early constitution ordered an end to the building of synagogues and the destruction of existing ones in places where there would be little or no resistance. It was also under Pulcheria's stewardship that the murder of the popular pagan philosopher, Hypatia, occurred in Alexandria at the hands of Christians, encouraged, no less, by the archbishop, Cyril. Her order was brutal and barbaric, but the imperial court let it go unpunished. To what degree this decision represented Theodosius' acceptance is difficult to establish, but clearly he did not strenuously object to this pro-active policy of asserting Christianity as the proper belief of the empire.

Apart from educating Theodosius in the arts of statecraft and heavily imbuing him with Christian morals, Pulcheria made it her business to find her younger brother an appropriate spouse. Such arrangements would have normally been carried out by a mother or father, but since they were both deceased, the job fell to the eldest sibling. Traditionally, Pulcheria was thought to have picked an appropriate wife for her younger brother. The chosen girl, Athenaïs, was young, intelligent, and well-educated by her philosopher father. She herself was a poet of some repute. Although poor, Athenaïs converted to Christianity, took the name Aelia Eudocia, and married the young emperor in June of 421. Recent scholarship has suggested, however, that Eudocia was less the choice of Pulcheria than she was the candidate of many of the disenfranchised aristocrats of the eastern empire. Indeed, the two women's subsequent disagreements and Eudocia's eventual disgrace implied that there was considerable competition for prestige and authority.

Pulcheria's most visible influence on state policy came during the ecumenical council held at Ephesus in the summer of 431. Trying to settle once and for all christological issues surrounding God's nature, the council condemned the Nestorian controversy, which had presumed that Christ had two separate persons -- one human, one divine -- in his incarnation. Pulcheria engineered opposition against Nestorius (who was the patriarch of Constantinople at the time), not so much because of his objection to the Nicene creed, but because of his rejection of the increasingly important Mother of God (Theotokos) movement. Nicaea was upheld, Nestorius was deposed and exiled, and Nestorianism was declared heresy. Pulcheria had used Cyril of Alexandria and other bishops to gain control of the religious debate in the capital and the eastern Empire.

In other areas of government, Pulcheria's hand rested more lightly. Military affairs and administrative changes were for the most part left to the experts. Helion, for example, was made Master of Offices (*magister officiorum*) and held the post for thirteen years. Nevertheless, even after the emperor's majority, the Augusta's presence was always felt: we know little of Helion's magistracy other than he seems to have been a competent minister. Nor did her power ebb after her brother's death: it was Pulcheria, after all, who lent legitimacy through marriage to Theodosius' successor, **Marcian**. The only real threat to her dominance over Theodosius came in the person of the emperor's wife. Aelia Eudocia had at first tried to build a faction of loyal officials around her, including her uncle Asclepiodotus, and sought to pursue more moderate religious policies. She also apparently bore the emperor three children, although only **Licinia Eudoxia** survived. But such power proved transitory and slowly Pulcheria came back to the fore with her persecution of the Nestorians. The marriage of **Licinia** to **Valentinian III** in 437 only reinforced the struggle: Pulcheria gained by virtue of her own Theodosian blood, but Eudocia also gained as mother of the bride.

In the late 430s, the two struggled directly for dominance over the emperor's favor. As with Pulcheria's rise to power, the augustae chose the religious sphere to assert their control. The emperor's sister oversaw the return of John Chrysostom's relics to Constantinople and lobbied for the passage of new strict anti-pagan and anti-Jewish legislation. As a means of reasserting her own standing, Eudocia went to the Holy Land on pilgrimage with the famous ascetic, Melania the Younger, and returned in 439 with important relics and enormous prestige. With the help of the sword-bearer (spatharius), Chrysaphius, she sought to have Pulcheria removed from court. While this plot had some limited success, the eunuch soon turned on Eudocia and engineered her fall through rumors of adultery. Theodosius' wife once again left the capital, this time permanently. In the late 440s, she eventually took up the monophysitic cause. Thus, Pulcheria may have won the struggle, bust she had lost the prize: Theodosius was no longer under her influence.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Theodosius' foreign policies centered around three axes: relations with the Persians, the encroachment of the Hun confederation under Rua and later Attila, and the precarious balance of power in the Mediterranean. In all three areas, the emperor and his ministers showed themselves to be occasionally adept, but for the most part unable to deal effectively with the rapid changes occurring around them.

Persian relations were good for the first years of Theodosius' reign. Isdigerdes' sponsorship of the emperor at his accession and his apparently moderate attitudes towards Christianity assured amicability between the two empires until the Great King's death in 421. But with his death and the accession of his son, Vararanes V, hostilities broke out again. The new king allegedly began a persecution of Christians, and some Roman citizens were harassed. The king embarked upon a campaign against Rome's eastern territories, but was very quickly defeated by several able generals, including one Germanic officer, Ardabur. Having been defeated on all fronts, the Persians and Rome signed the One-Hundred-Year Peace, which was supposed to recognize each nation's borders and keep them largely demilitarized. Despite several infractions of that peace, including one in 440-441 with the accession of Isdigerdes II, the treaty remained largely unviolated for the rest of the fifth century. Not until 502 did a major confrontation between Rome and Persia erupt into war.

Of much greater concern were the steppe-dwellers of central Asia, the Huns. As nomadic horsemen, they rarely recognized central authority and thus had not represented a concerted threat to Rome's security. But under Rua, who successfully united the smaller tribes under his rule, they were able to directly affect the overall state of the Empire. Early in Theodosius' reign, a large contingency of Huns under Uldin had attacked Thrace. Although defeated, this first major sojourn into imperial territory presaged things to come. Despite repeated attempts to fortify the Balkan hinterlands against incursions of foreign invaders, the court at Constantinople found it politically expedient to deal with Hun aggression more directly; thus sometime in the mid-420s, the first annual indemnity, amounting to 350 pounds of gold, was paid to Rua.

Shortly thereafter, Rua died and was replaced by his even more able nephew, Attila (and Attila's brother, Bleda), who immediately demanded the doubling of the annual tribute to 700 pounds of gold and forced Theodosius' government to sign a treaty that was highly advantageous to the Huns. In 441, while Theodosius was engaged in campaigns against the Persians and the Vandals in the west, Attila made new demands on the government. When they were refused, the king plundered and sacked cities along the Danube. The Roman army was defeated and in 443, an even more humiliating treaty and tribute was forced upon the court. Now the annual tribute stood at 2,100 pounds of gold, with an additional punitive payment of 6,000 pounds due immediately. In 448, the demands were again raised and met by the Empire. By the time of Theodosius' death, the eastern empire's resources were near exhaustion.

For fifteen years, then, Constantinople had been forced into a policy of accommodation. Many in the government had been responsible for accepting the extortion, although many more opposed any payments at all. In 449, Chrysaphius -- now chamberlain (praepositus) and in effective control of the eastern empire -- plotted Attila's murder. Although it failed and created even greater attempts to please the Huns, it represented the first serious attempt to oppose Hunnic hegemony. Since the eunuch had probably been one of the main architects of appeasement, his plot no doubt signified the degree of desperation felt in the empire.

Despite these threats from the east, however, western affairs dominated Theodosius' foreign policy. Strong ties remained between Theodosius and his uncle, **Honorius**, and later his cousin, **Valentinian III**. When **Honorius** died in 423 and a pretender, **Ioannes**, tried to assume the purple in Ravenna, Theodosius sent a force under Ardabur to force recognition of his cousin, **Valentinian**. **Galla Placidia's** regency for the six-year-old emperor assured Theodosian legitimacy. Theodosius even recognized posthumously **Constantius III** (**Galla Placidia's** husband) as Augustus. The two emperors would eventually share four consulships together.

Nor was the east's support strictly symbolic. On two occasions, Theodosius sent large forces to aid the west against Vandal incursions. The first was an army in 431, led by Ardabur's son, Aspar, in an attempt to stop King Gaeseric's advance into the African provinces. Along with the count of Africa, Boniface, Roman forces were badly beaten and retreated to Carthage. The defeat emboldened the Vandals to take most of the rest of North Africa by 439.

Gaeseric's successes led to attacks on Sicily and the Italian coast. They laid siege to Palermo and may have taken Lilybaeum. Theodosius once again sent a large naval force against the Vandals in 441, with several initial successes. But perhaps through Gaeseric's diplomacy, the Persians chose at this time to attack Rome's eastern borders. Attila, too, saw the opportunity for aggression. Theodosius was forced to conclude a hasty treaty in 442. The agreement recognized the Vandals' holdings as a separate, independent kingdom in formerly Roman territory. This was symbolically a significant event: before this time, Germanic peoples had accepted settlement in Roman territory as official allies (foederati) of the empire. The treaty made manifest to all that Rome was no longer master of its own domain.

In all these dealings, Theodosius and his ministers did the best they could to deal with a series of crises happening throughout Europe and western Asia. The eastern half of the Roman Empire was able to weather them, the west was not. In sum, to survive, the government in Constantinople was forced to redefine its place in the world.

LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROGRAMS

It was during the reign of Theodosius that the first great pandect of Roman law was published, with direct participation from the emperor himself. In the age since **Diocletian**, when the last comprehensive law code had been issued, a large number of general constitutions had been published by both eastern and western emperors. Many were no longer salient to modern-day concerns, and many more were unworkable or contradictory. There was an additional problem of harmonizing the law codes of the east and the west, and creating a process by which each half of the empire could recognize one another's laws.

In March of 429, Theodosius set up a commission to take all existing laws from the late third century onward and arrange them in such a way as to present a completely new and current code of jurisprudence. Theodosius seemed less interested in getting rid of potential conflicts than he was in providing completeness and creating a truly comprehensive law. After six years, an initial edition was completed in 435, but was not published. A new commission was appointed, headed by a lawyer from Antioch, Antiochus Chuzon, to improve the language and create a system by which the code could be further emended and enlarged.

In February of 438, the Codex Theodosianus was published and presented to the Senates in Rome and Constantinople, which both received the work with apparent enthusiasm. Consistent with his desire to make the code an expandable document, Theodosius himself issued several supplementary laws (*novellae*).

The code had enormous influence, both in itself and in future legal history. It proved to be the basis for the emperor **Justinian's** much more ambitious judicial reforms in the following century. The Visigothic king, Alaric II, also incorporated large parts of Theodosius' work into the Lex Romana Visigothorum in 507. The code is probably the only major accomplishment during Theodosiusí reign that can be directly attributed to his influence.

The emperor's administrative reforms were also aggressive, although their results were mixed. In the 420s and 430s the emperor and his ministers, perhaps because of fiscal pressures, enacted fiscal policies that attempted to bring more revenue into the imperial coffers. One such policy was a much more forceful collection of rents on imperial lands granted to lessees, another discontinued the extensive tax exemptions held on large tracts of land, and still another attempted levy wealthy taxpayers in gold coin. In the last case, the levies were in direct response to the increasing monetary demands of the Huns. The emperor also tried to cut down on the sale of offices, which was a ubiquitous problem at all levels of government. Subsequent legislation of the same sort in the following centuries suggests that such measures were not altogether successful.

These fiscal policies went hand-in-hand with Theodosius' legal work. Theodosius moved towards greater administrative control by reserving the issuance of grant deeds of imperial lands to the very highest of offices. Such moves were part of a broader centralization of authority in the eastern Rome and helped create the apparatus of the Byzantine state.

FINAL YEARS

On July 28, 450, Theodosius II fell from his horse in an accident and died shortly thereafter. On his deathbed, he purportedly named **Marcian** as his successor. Whether or not this was the case, Marcian was crowned emperor less than a month later in the hippodrome.

The emperor's death could not have come at a more confusing time. Since the emperor had produced no male issue, there was no clear heir to the throne. From his immediate family, only his sister, Pulcheria, survived in the eastern Empire. Moreover, following the attempted assassination of Attila, both Romans and Huns were deeply suspicious of one another. The past twenty years of Hun extortion had also drained the imperial treasury. In the west, despite strong support for **Valentinian**, Theodosius was unable to keep the Vandals from consolidating their gains in the Mediterranean. Gaeseric was willing and able to take up further wars when opportunity presented.

Finally, the religious victories of orthodox Christians were temporarily thrown into disarray by Theodosius II himself. Calling a general council at Ephesus in 449, usually called the Robber Council or *Latrocinium*, it favored the christological stance of Eutyches and his supporters. He argued the monophysitic position that Christ had only one nature and it was divine. Matters were made worse by the deposition and subsequent death of Constantinople's patriarch, Flavian. The decision to support his beliefs caused widespread dissent in Constantinople, insulted and alienated the west in the person of Pope Leo I, and represented the first major split between eastern and western Christendom.

In the end, Theodosius II had a small enough legacy given the length of his reign aside from his legal initiatives. His studied and visible piety would become a model for future emperors, and his Theodosian blood kept civil wars practically non-existent. For that, the east enjoyed considerable internal stability. But his reign also marked the clear shrinking of Rome's empire and its influence. Future emperors were forced to deal with a western empire politically disintegrating and a Mediterranean that was no longer mare nostrum ("our sea"). Much of the following fifty years helped to create the empire of Byzantium. Theodosius II's quiescence helped in no small part.

ASSESSMENTS AND LEGACY

Theodosius is often seen by both ancient and modern historians as being constantly pushed around by his sister, wife, and eunuchs, particularly Chrysaphius among them. In the later decades of his life, Chrysaphius rose to prominence as one of the emperor's favorites. He favored the pro-Monophysite policy, influenced the foreign policy towards the Huns, and was resented by Pulcheria, general Zeno, and pro-Chalcedonian writers. According to Theodorus Lector, Theodosius was so unmindful of his surroundings that he accidentally signed his sister's note selling his wife, Eudocia, into slavery.

However, these views of Theodosius have been challenged in modern scholarship. Some historians argue that contrary to hostile ancient sources, Theodosius was more in control of his government. Others view that the government was controlled mostly by the high ranking civilian officials of the *consistorium*, and not by Pulcheria or Eudocia. Historian Christopher Kelly notes that the modern dismissal of Theodosius has origins in the Enlightenment disapproval, and argues that "the reign of Theodosius II should not be too quickly dismissed, simplified or partitioned."

Among ancient and medieval writers, Monophysites had a favorable opinion of Theodosius. Theodosius was also a very learned emperor, with a great aptitude for maths, history, astronomy and writing, hence his nickname "the Calligrapher" by some later historians. Theodosius has been described by Kenneth Holum as "a man of intelligence and sincerity but little backbone."

Saint Right-Believing Theodosius II the Younger is commemorated in Eastern Orthodox Church on 29 July.